

SUPERMAN RETURNS

WORDS ADAM SMITH

While fans chatter about codpieces and a quarter-billion-dollar budget, comic book franchise darling Bryan Singer tells *Empire* of the stressful but rewarding personal journey he's taking to return Superman to the silver screen...





This may be a "seismic event" caused by Superman impacting on Metropolis.

Empire: I suppose the first thing is that after Se7en and Swimming With Sharks you must have been offered every villain in every comic book, summer movie...

Kevin Spacey: Yes...

Empire: ...and you, well you obviously turned them down. So why now...

Spacey: Would I want to play Lex Luthor?

Empire: Yeah...

Spacey: The answer to that is just two words. [Pause]

Empire: Which would be?

Spacey: Bryan Singer.

ONE AFTERNOON, SOMETIME

in February 2003, Bryan Singer's cell phone rang. He glanced at the caller display and pulled his car over to answer it. The call was from a friend and colleague, the director Brett Ratner. Ratner was in the early stages of pre-production on his latest film and had rung to ask a favour. His regular second unit director wasn't going to be available and he wondered if Singer had any ideas for a replacement. The project was a big deal, and whoever

took the job would have to have had experience of a long, complex shoot on a big budget tentpole flick. Singer had a couple of suggestions for which Ratner was grateful. The friends shot the shit for a few minutes before Singer hung up. But Singer didn't drive on immediately. Instead he pondered the conversation for a few moments. The movie in question was then titled *Superman Reborn* and what Ratner didn't know was that his good-natured call had been pure hell for his friend.

"I was being the good friend and recommending the best people," he remembers. "But frankly I was envious as hell. I'll never forget the conversation – I was on Robertson Boulevard, pulled over so I wouldn't lose reception, and he was telling me all about it and I was just," he pauses and winces slightly, "...jealous." (It's probably fair to say then that Singer hadn't appreciated Ratner's Christmas card that year – the seasonal greeting featured a photo of Superman with Ratner's face superimposed over Christopher Reeve's.)

It was, though, just the latest and not the last chapter in the agonising, decades-long process of resurrecting the

man in tights. As of 1987 and *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace*, the franchise lay in ruins. A combination of Reeve's unwise insistence that he write the story and that the film be saddled with a po-faced environmental "message", together with troubled Cannon Film's halving the budget from \$US35 million to \$17m days before production, led to a film so bereft of effects moolah that the original's tagline – "You'll believe a man can fly!" – became a trigger for belly laughs: the wires were tragically apparent throughout the movie.

Skip six years and having seen the stratospheric success of the Batman franchise Warner Brothers bought the rights to Superman from producer Alexander Salkind in 1993. It would then take them nearly a decade and a half and \$US40m of development money (all spent before a frame of film was shot) to get Superman into the sky again.

Among the first to take a run at the project was Kevin Smith. Catastrophe hit the Smith project in the form of celebrity hairdresser and sometime film producer Jon Peters who first demanded that Superman be clad entirely in black (the traditional suit and cape being, as he put it in one infamous script note, "too faggy"). A demand that Superman have a fight in the fortress of solitude confused Smith – it being pretty solitary in there – until Peters solved the problem at a stroke by declaring that the fight would be with a Polar Bear because, "Polar Bears are the most fierce animals in the animal kingdom". An increasingly despondent Smith acquiesced to this request, as well as one for a climactic battle with a giant mechanical spider, and the somewhat odd rule that Superman not actually be able to fly... But it was Peters' demand that the villain, Brainiac, be equipped with a gay robot sidekick to be voiced by – and only by – an effeminate black man that finally sent Smith screaming for the hills. (That and his reported desire to cast Sean Penn as Superman because he had "the cold

black eyes of a killer".) Incidentally, Peters put his giant robot spider in *Wild Wild West*, which became the only Will Smith summer vehicle to tank at the box office.

With Smith out, Tim Burton entered. He ditched the Smith screenplay and, to fans' voluble displeasure, said that he intended Nicolas Cage to don the tights and trunks. This outrage, coupled with a projected budget that had by now skyrocketed perilously close to \$200m, forced Warners to temporarily ice the project and look for alternatives. They came thick and fast: there was Wolfgang Petersen's *Batman Vs Superman* which was soon dropped (why, after all, combine two successful franchises into one and halve your potential revenue?) in favour of a project to be helmed by McG, who then ran into scheduling problems and vacated the director's chair in favour of Brett Ratner. Only weeks after his phone call to Singer, Ratner abandoned the movie over budget issues to be replaced again by McG, who departed again over an argument regarding location: Warners had decided to shoot in Australia in order to take advantage of tax incentives, while McG preferred Canada partly for artistic reasons but mostly because he is phobic of flying over open water and so couldn't actually go to Australia.

Finally, in the midst of what was becoming an expensive debacle, someone saw sense. Wasn't Bryan Singer meant to be interested in *Superman*? There would be problems, he was meant to be prepping a remake of *Logan's Run* for a start, but it might be worth taking a meeting. Less than 72 hours after that meeting Singer telephoned production designer Guy Hendrix Dyas who was working on pre-production designs for *Logan's Run*. "Stop work on *Logan*," he said. "We're doing *Superman* instead."

FOX STUDIOS, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA,
20th June 2005. The exterior of the *Daily Planet* is a cracked, ruined mess. Thick polythene tubes belch

FINALLY, IN THE MIDST OF WHAT WAS BECOMING A DEBACLE, SOMEONE SAW SENSE. WASN'T BRYAN SINGER INTERESTED IN DOING SUPERMAN?



We're guessing this is a souvenir from Krypton.

thin smoke into the crisp Sydney morning, while occasionally shattered bits of pavement gush water or, more alarmingly, propane flames. Streams of terrified workers run pell-mell from the building while yellow taxis weave through the growing chaos. "Bang!" an assistant director yells. A few extras skid to a halt and move round a stopped taxi. "We're going to crash those cars," says the first AD, "so we're just running through it with the extras a few times for safety."

In order to keep the plot a, "closely guarded secret" all that anyone is saying is that this urban chaos is the result of a "seismic event" (though a friendly note to unit publicity: if you want to keep the causes of "seismic events" a "closely guarded secret" don't show journalists screeds of production art including drawings of Superman plunging to earth and a resultant crater at the heart of Metropolis.) Bryan Singer wanders around making the odd adjustment here and there and narrowly avoids being doused with a hose that is drenching the rapidly drying set. "It's really about old boyfriends coming back," he muses, finally settling down as taxis reverse and extras traipse back into the *Daily Planet*. »

"He returns to Earth after five years away; he's the same Superman but everyone's kind of moved on. It's become a more violent, difficult place. At its heart it's what happens when messiahs and saviours return, but it's also a kind of a love story."

It's kind of a love story in more ways than one. Singer was first in line to see Richard Donner's film in 1978. "I can tell you exactly where I saw it," he says. "It was opening night, the afternoon show at 5pm at the Prince Theatre on Route 1 in New Jersey with my mom."

And his first reaction? Anger.

"I was shocked that the theatre was half full," he smiles. "I thought it was a *crime*. I mean there was so much anticipation for the film. But in rural America you have dinner at five or six, you don't go to the movies. After we left the movie, I walked out and there were lines around the theatre. I was thinking, 'OK, great it's going to do well.' And I loved the movie. I remember thinking wouldn't it be cool to just step into the sky..."

It was Donner's very human take on the myth that impressed and moved Singer, and it's an element his own film will do its best to replicate. (He gained Donner's blessing before embarking on the project and as a result gained access to previously unseen Marlon Brando footage to be incorporated into a Fortress Of Solitude sequence). "The strength of that movie is in character," he explains. "They made Superman a person. Actually, three wonderful characters: Clark on the farm, Clark in the newsroom and Kal-El. Each character has their moment. And Donner pushes the emotional boundaries. He ponders the nature of the character and finds his essence in a tiny moment in the 1978 movie. In the newsroom, Lois shakes a soda up and gives it to him and it spills over him. And he says something like, 'What kind of person would want to make stranger look like a total fool?' He's such a strong, noble, character. It's mythic."

FOR HIS SUPERMAN STORY Singer and co-writers Dan Harris and Michael Dougherty again focussed on the character before the action. Who was Superman? What made him tick? And how would it be if he returned from a failed quest to find out more about himself, about his parents, and, in the meantime, the world had just forgotten about him? If Lois had a kid and was busy hacking out articles for *The Daily Planet* on why she and the world were better off without him? Ironically enough, Singer found a few clues in his own childhood. "I'm adopted," he says, mulling the odd similarities between his childhood and the young Clark Kent's. "I don't know my biological parents [*in fact, he later says that he knows that his biological father was English and the his mother put him up for adoption*]



Me! Gibson might've wished for these powers in *Signs*.

when she was aged 15 or 16]. I was raised by incredibly wonderful [*adoptive*] parents as an only child. So there's something similar about discovering who you are as you are growing up. There's this romantic notion of who your 'real' parents are. When as a young kid you start to rebel you find ways of punishing your parents. Whenever my parents would deprive me of anything, for my own good, it would be 'You're not my *real* parents. They'd *never* do this. It's not fair.'"

After the childhood ritual of the slamming of bedroom doors had been completed, he engaged in sulky reveries about who those "real" parents might be. "Yeah, of course I fantasised, 'What if my biological parents were from another planet?' You know, Jor-El, Kal-El, Bryan-El..." he laughs. "But as you get older you start to realise that that gives me a more complex and interesting heritage. There's a mystery there."

There are other elements to his childhood that he's been exploring in the improbable arena of



The new look Clark Kent, same old glasses.

MAN OF JELLY! The Superman spin-offs that should never have been made

SUPERPUP!

A 1958 children's show featuring midgets dressed as dogs, *Superpup* concerned the crime fighting adventures of reporter Bark Kent, aka Superpup, and his battles to save Pamela Poodle from the nefarious Professor Sheepdip. Oddly Kent worked for the *Daily Bugle*. Odd because that's Spider-Man's paper, not because the use of a typewriter would be physically impossible.

BROADWAY!

Because a man in bright red pants and a cape isn't camp enough, Superman went to Broadway in 1966. *It's A Bird! It's A Plane! It's Superman!* was a musical comedy featuring such classic tunes as *It's Super Nice* and *Pow! Bam! Zonk!*. It was popular enough to get a cheapo TV adaptation in the '70s, but hardly fits with the heroic image of Superman.

BOLLYWOOD!

In about 1987, *The Indian Superman* - a diabolically awful, not to mention illegal, rip-off of Richard Donner's film - flew out of the sub-continent and into the homes and hearts of a few devotees of bad movies. Abysmally acted and directed, this 150-minute opus literally stole music and fx footage from the 1978 film. It also features the Indian Supes breakdancing to Michael Jackson!

THE KRYPTON FACTOR!

Trust the Brits. In the 1980s, the UK was blitzed by a quiz show that aimed to discover Supermen and women in everyday life by having them fall in dirty puddles on an army assault course, use Perspex blocks to form a map of Greater Manchester and answer general knowledge questions. Made suspect by the fact contestants never had to, "kneel before Zod!" Super naff!

THAT WON'T FLY!

Those Super Sequels that never got off the ground

SUPERMAN: THE NEW MOVIE (1993)

Director: None

In a nutshell: Warner Bros purchases rights to make Superman films from Alexander Salkind, and announces *Superman: The New Movie* in *Variety*.

Controversy: Takes another 13 years to get made.

SUPERMAN REBORN (1995)

Director: None

In a nutshell: Loosely based on the *Death of Superman* comic series. Opens with said death and follows his newborn successor, who saves the universe before he is out of short tights.

Controversy: Supes impregnates Lois Lane with his "spirit".

UNTITLED SUPERMAN PROJECT (1996)

Director: None

In a nutshell: Mad alien Brainiac attempts to defeat Superman with the aid of a monster with Kryptonite for blood.

Controversy: Supes swaps tights for a sleek new black ensemble.

SUPERMAN LIVES (1996)

Director: Robert Rodriguez

In a nutshell: Lex Luthor, Brainiac and his faithful robot El-Ron (as in Hubbard) discover the man of steel's powers are derived from the sun, so block its rays to defeat him. Script written by Kevin Smith.

Controversy: Sun-blocking plot appears on *The Simpsons*.

SUPERMAN LIVES (1997-1998)

Director: Tim Burton

In a nutshell: Still based on the *Death Of Superman* story. Set to star Nicolas Cage as Superman, Kevin Spacey as Lex Luthor and Jack Nicholson as Brainiac.

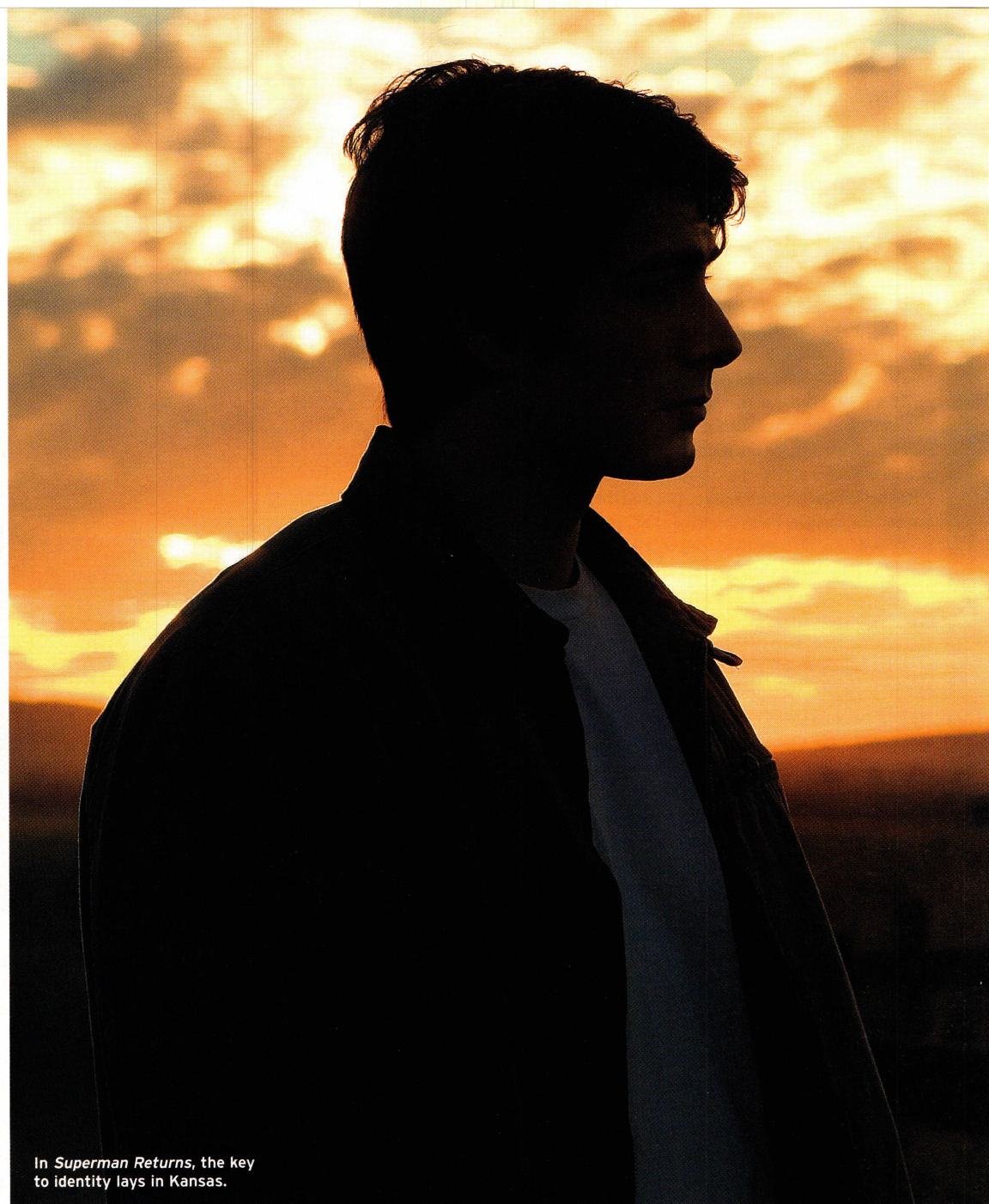
Controversy: Smith's firing. Jimmy Olsen is black. So is Supes' suit.

SUPERMAN: LAST SON OF KRYPTON (2002-2005)

Directors: Brett Ratner, McG

In a nutshell: JJ Abrams creates an origin story full of shock twists.

Controversy: Krypton wasn't destroyed. Superman does martial arts, has an evil twin, dies (saving Lois), and comes back to life. Lex Luthor works for the CIA. And he's Kryptonian. With super powers, etc.



In *Superman Returns*, the key to identity lays in Kansas.

multi-million dollar summer blockbusters. From the reviled status of the mutants of his two *X-Men* movies, now to Superman – the “ultimate immigrant”, as he puts it – the theme of the lonely outsider resonates. “We were also the only Jewish family in a predominantly Catholic neighbourhood. So here I was, different on all these levels,” he says. “And my parents were the first to get divorced in my neighbourhood. My parents split up when I was about 13. So here I was adopted, Jewish, a product of divorce and an only child. There were all those things.”

It should hardly be a surprise then that he finds the key to unlocking Superman's character not light years away on Krypton, but in his childhood on a small farm in the Midwest. “Yeah, he is very much a product of the Kent family,” he confirms. “You know people always seem to ask which is the disguise, who is the ‘real’ character. In reality, both are kind of disguises, there's a bit of showmanship in being Superman and there's a pretence in being Clark, a charade he's putting on to try to make himself awkward and invisible in the office. But the true Clark Kent is the character raised on the farm by the

Kent family. I told Brandon he should always be that – the foundation of Superman and Clark is how you were raised on that farm. That's the true character.”

While Kevin Spacey had been a cert for Luthor from the start, Singer was determined to echo Donner's inspired decision to go with an unknown for the lead role. (Previous incarnations of the project had had Jim Caviezel, Josh Hartnett and Paul Walker as potential Men Of Steel.) He found an old audition tape of Brandon Routh, an ex-model and sometime soap actor whose highest profile job so far had been an appearance in a *Will & Grace* episode entitled *A Gay/December Romance*, in one of Ratner's towering reject piles. The first thing he noticed was that the 26-year-old bore a superficial resemblance to Christopher Reeve, but it wasn't until they met for a low-profile chat in a Hollywood café (Singer was paranoid at the time that any decision he made could leak before he was ready to announce his casting) that he realised he might have his guy.

“In most of the cases they were acting the role,” he says. “Brandon transcended that. He was acting but he

THERE HAVE BEEN EXPLOSIVE INTERNET CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE EXACT PROPORTIONS APPROPRIATE FOR SUPERMAN'S CODPIECE...

was also being it a bit. Not so much in the early tapes I'd seen. It was when I met with him in person for two hours. That's when I was determined he could be the guy. Then I shot a screen test with him. And you could see him being the character rather than acting it."

And there's the small matter of the 6' 3" frame, high-school star quarterback physique and the echoes of Reeve in Routh's chiselled mug. "My Superman has to look and feel like he's stepped out of our collective memory," says Singer. "And part of it is that, yeah, he looks just a little like Christopher Reeve."

If he had any lingering doubts they were banished months after the coffee shop meeting. One morning, very early in pre-production in Sydney, Singer got a call from the costume department. There was yet another problem with the suit, or rather with one of the 60-odd suits – action suits, flying suits, "beauty" suits – being manufactured, all with thousands of tiny red-and-yellow S's making up the iconic "S". Singer wandered over to costume and in the shadows of a poky corridor stood a figure from his past – Superman. The filmmaker and fan smiles. "He was just in a dark hallway in Sydney. It was amazing. There he is, just standing there and he just looked ... radiant."

But the shoot itself hasn't been plain sailing. It's the single biggest project Singer has ever taken on – the budget is rumoured to hover at an incredible \$250m – and the film is taking its toll. The newfangled Genesis Camera (Singer is shooting digitally and the Genesis Camera will, he says, give parts of the film a unique, pastel look, "A bit like Hitchcock's *Rebecca*") has shown an alarming tendency to shut itself off and resolutely refuses to switch back on when exposed to even the tiniest drop of anything damp. For Routh the physical act of flying has become, "Pretty much a study in pain endurance". There have been explosive internet controversies around the precise size of the "S" on Superman's chest; endless discussions about the exact proportions that are appropriate for Superman's codpiece (resolved in the end by the development of a patented ball-flattening device – yet another of the medieval tortures designed for Routh but intended, as once costume designer has been reported to say, "To keep everything PG"). The strains of the shoot become such that, a couple of weeks after *Empire* leaves, Singer takes the dramatic decision to unexpectedly suspend filming on day 109, take a three-week break and come back to finish the movie.

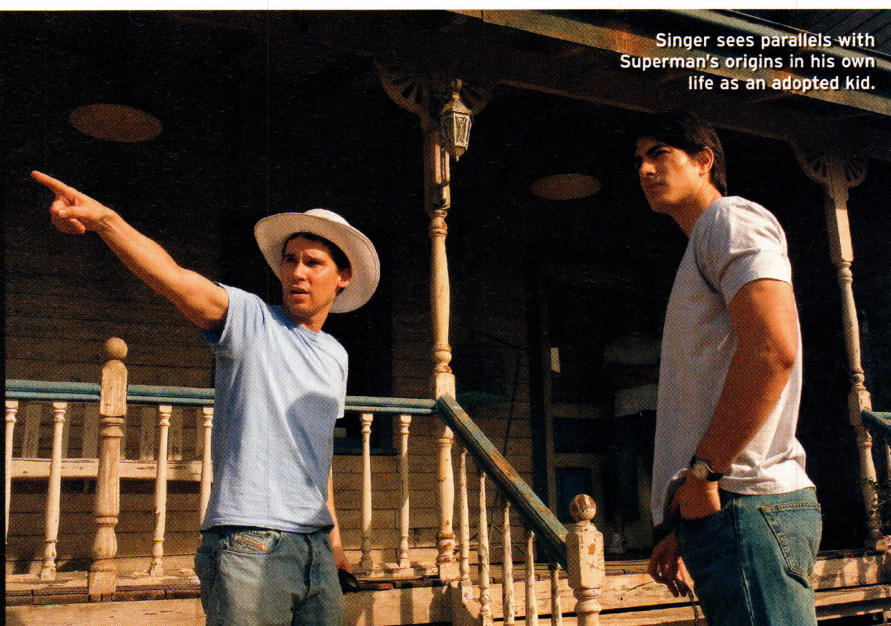
But even in the midst of all the production drama there's still the odd moment when Singer is reminded of the magnitude of what he's involved in; that he is breathing new life into one of the world's most beloved cultural icons. That this isn't like *X-Men*, where frankly only fans of the original comic books series even knew who they were. As Singer puts it, "If you took a cross and a Superman "S" into the jungle and met some obscure tribe you'd get 50/50 recognition."

"Sometimes you're absorbed in work and you look up and there he is and you have to pinch yourself," he says. "It's the same for everyone. One of my most vivid memories so far is a moment when Jack Larson (who starred as Jimmy Olsen in the 1950s TV series and has a cameo) walked on the set of the roof of *The Daily Planet*. We were talking and then suddenly he went quiet, his eyes got wide and he just said, '*There he is.*' I looked round and Brandon had walked onto the set in the suit. You know, Jack hadn't seen Superman in over 50 years."

Daa-da-da-daaa-daaa-da ... Whumpf!



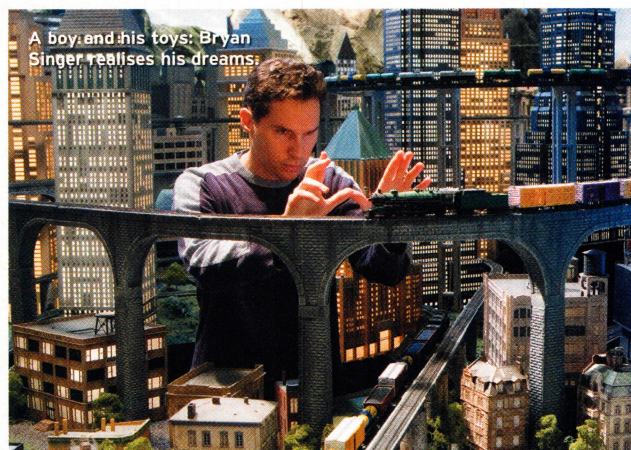
Singer sees parallels with Superman's origins in his own life as an adopted kid.



SUPERMAN RETURNS



The Daily Planet, where Lois writes off Superman.



A boy and his toys: Bryan Singer realises his dreams.

THE FOOTAGE *EMPIRE* SEES IS ACTION PACKED, EMOTIONAL AND THOROUGHLY IMPRESSIVE. IT IS ALSO BARELY FIVE MINUTES LONG.

WE'RE ON THE WARNER BROTHERS

lot in Burbank, April, 2006, and the door to Singer's edit suite swings open delivering a tantalising blast of John Ottman's riff on John Williams' original score before it slams shut again. Signs dotted around announce that we're in the post-production office for *Red Sun*, still *Superman Returns*' secret codename though it's fooling no one. A desultory security guard standing nearby looks pained. "I've been listening to that... *Daa-da-da-da-da-da-da-da... Whumpf!*... for three months," he says sadly. "I was once walking past and I saw a couple of seconds maybe. But then... *Whumpf!*"

It cannot improve his mood, then, when *Empire* saunters in to have a look at a rough assemblage consisting of burning jetliners, blue and red blurs and a Lex Luthor significantly nastier than the Gene Hackman model. It's action packed, emotional and thoroughly impressive. It is also barely five minutes long.

"These movies are finished the day before delivery," sighs Singer after the editor explains that actually the majority of the effects shots we've just seen will in all likelihood end up being re-done. The director is a visibly exhausted man; his back and neck are obviously giving him hell ("It's brought on by stress," he ruefully admits) and he positively writhes in his seat trying to find a comfortable position. The somewhat tatty kitchen nearby boasts a neat line up of Gaviscon, Alka-Seltzer and other indigestion cures that testify to long nights and hastily snatched meals. Singer is at least back on familiar turf, which is, it turns out, a relief.

"I had a lot of sleep issues while we were shooting," he explains. "A lot of them I attribute to the workload, a lot of them I attribute to being that far away from home. There was something about Australia that was a little weird. Something unquantifiable, being that far away from your family and your home base that it just throws

you. We all felt like that. It's a beautiful country and the crew was fantastic, but it was just strange.

"I suffer and complain all the time," he continues. "I have not found a way of working that isn't fraught with day-to-day frustration. There's always some kind of conflict going, some kind of problem, some kind of ailment. I have that weird fear that the day I figure out a system where it's all easy and it's comfortable and you have fun every day, that's when the films will start sucking. But as tough as it gets and as frustrated as I get, my sole concern is the quality of the film. For everybody's sake."

Any final regrets? The size of that "S" for example? Surely it's a worry...

"Look," Singer laughs. "If people come out saying, 'Well it would have been a *really great* movie if only they hadn't *ruined* it with the size of the 'S' well..." – A brief look of anxiety flickers across his face – "... Well, I guess in that case it *was* important."

EMPIRE IS GETTING UP and exchanging the usual post-interview pleasantries when we turn around and notice the photograph that dominates the wall behind us. It's a shot of Singer suspended in mid-air. As a gag during some downtime the wire crew stuck Singer on a rig and swung him around over the amber cornfields of the Kent family farm.

"They shot me upwards hundreds of feet at 35 miles-an-hour," Singer shrugs. "Freaked me out." But the expression Singer has in the photograph is hardly freaked out. It looks actually like pure pleasure. Something akin to joy. It's appropriate. After all the kid who walked out of the Prince Theatre on Route 1 in New Jersey and wondered what it would be like to step out into the sky is finally flying.

» *Superman Returns* is out on June 28 and will be reviewed in the next issue.

SUPERFACTS

Co-creator Jerry Siegel said that the name Clark Kent was a combination of the names of Clark Gable and his brother-in-law Kent Taylor, a '40s movie actor.

Superman and Lois Lane first kissed in the *Superman #3* comic. She plants one on him after he saves a town from a flood.

Marlon Brando received \$400,000 per minute of screen time for his performance in the original *Superman* movie.

Superman once appeared in animated form in *Sesame Street*. He was teaching children all about the letter S, which stands to reason.

The first Superman created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster was a bald villain bent on world domination. The issue comic didn't sell, forcing the rethink.

Superman as we know him first appeared in Action Comics #1 in June 1938.

Originally Superman could not fly. Instead his sturdy super legs allowed him to "leap tall buildings in a single bound" as said in the intro to the 1950s TV show.

Clark Kent earned his journalism degree at the Metropolis University.

Contrary to internet gossip, Brandon Routh's crotch was not digitally reduced for being too super. He actually wore a cup.